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U.S. MERCHANT MARINE - WWII
LAST SURVIVOR of THE SINKING OF THE SS JEAN NICOLET

I was eighteen when I got assigned to the SS Jean Nicolet, a Liberty Ship built in Portland. It was my third trip to sea. I had tried to enlist in the regular military, but I have an eye problem and they classified me 4-F. Everybody I knew was in that war- including all my brothers. My dad had been in World War I. Our family always did what we could. I wanted to do my part also. I had to do somethin' so I joined the Merchant Marine.

We shipped out of San Pedro, California in May 1944. Things were goin' pretty good till we got about 700 miles south of Ceylon. That's when the nightmare started.

I was lookin' at the sky when the torpedo hit. I was shook up pretty good, but I ran up to my gun station. Later another torpedo hit. The Captain gave the order to abandon ship. There were 100 of us aboard-mostly Merchant mariners, some Navy Armed Guard, some Army guys and a few civilians.

Not long after we got into the lifeboats, this Jap submarine surfaced and started shelling our ship. They turned their searchlights on and started scouring the water. We didn't know what they wanted until they got close and started hollerin' at us Hands up or we shoot you!' They had machine guns trained on us.

They cut us with bayonets and knives, hit us with rifle butts and steel pipes, kicked us and yelled insults. They tore our lifejacket off us, jerked off any wristwatches, rings or dog tags we were wearing, and went through our pockets taking everything. They made us take off our shoes and strip to our skivvies, and tied our hands behind our backs.

They shot one young man right off the bat. They hit him over the head with a heavy piece of pipe, then this Jap pulled out his pistol and shot him in the head and kicked his body overboard before he hit the deck. The Jap was laughing the whole time. He was only 17 and it was his first trip to sea.

The Japs took the Captain Nilsson, the radio operator, and Mr. O'Gara, a representative for the War Shipping Department, to the conning tower and shoved them below. None of us ever saw them again.

Pretty soon they killed another young man. Richard Kean was from Ft. Klamath, Oregon. He was only 18 or 19. They bayoneted him in the stomach and while he was bent over in pain they hit him in the head with a rifle butt and kicked him over the side. He had his hands tied behind his back and couldn't possibly defend himself.

The Japs had set up a gauntlet of about 10 to 15 men on the after deck. They would come and take our guys back one at a time. We were forced to run the gauntlet and were kicked, clubbed and beaten with steel pipes. If anyone survived, he was stabbed in the stomach by this huge Jap standing at the end with a bayonet. Then tossed overboard.

After two or three hours of that torture, there were only about thirty of us left. Then I heard the air coming out of the sub's tanks and knew we were going to dive. I couldn't get my hands loose. It was a hell of a long ways to the surface, but I'm a good swimmer. I had been treading water for about an hour when this guy came along and cut me loose. He had a pocketknife he'd managed to hide. He and I helped some other guys get loose. It was really scary during the night. The sharks were getting some of the men.

A PBY plane flew over and flashed a message that we would be picked up the next morning. Next morning we saw the ship coming to rescue us. It was the most beautiful sight we'd ever seen! We were picked up on July 4, 1944 by a British subchaser. They took us to a British hospital. We were put on a train and went all the way across India to Bombay where we caught an Army transport back home.

A Naval officer gave a speech and told us we were an inspiration to American youth. They tell me I'm the only one left. Hard to believe! In October 1993, more than forty-nine years after this horrible experience, I was presented with the Prisoner of War Medal by the US government, also the International Prisoner of War Award from England. I've got two big reasons to celebrate the 4 of July. It's our Nation's birthday and the anniversary of the date I got rescued off that dammed raft! I'm a hell of a good swimmer, but I sure got some help from somewhere else that time!

(Note) Bill Flury was selected to represent the Merchant Marine veterans of WWII at the sixth and final regional Department of Defense 60th anniversary celebration of WWII. On August 28, 2005 in Vancouver WA, Bill was honored on the stage with the other Service branch veteran representatives. He was pinned with the "ruptured duck" pin by the Governor of Oregon.